



GENERAL NOTES

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GENERAL NOTES

STUDIES IN THE SOCIETY'S HISTORY AND ARCHIVES

A CHAPEL OF NATURAL AND REVEALED RELIGION:

JAMES BARRY'S SERIES FOR THE SOCIETY'S GREAT ROOM REINTERPRETED (i)

According to James Barry's close friend and biographer Edward Fryer, the artist attempted in his series of six murals at the [Royal] Society of Arts to depict 'no less than the complete history of the human mind in its various stages from barbarity to refinement', ending in 'the final retribution awarded to all in a future world'.¹ It is, to say the least, an ambitious undertaking, and perhaps one's first impression of the series as a whole is its diversity and complexity. When he began to work on these murals in 1777, Barry had in mind Raphael's *Stanza della Segnatura*, but his own designs lack the harmonious synthesis that is readily apparent in Raphael's balanced compositions. Barry's world is more fragmented and perplexing, lacking the reassuring affirmation of order and symmetry found in the Vatican frescos. The artist warns us in his written description of his paintings that their meaning is not easily decipherable. In the introduction to his *An Account of a Series of Pictures* of 1783, he maintains that 'the principal merit of Painting as well as of Poetry, is its address to the mind',² and he also writes that 'it is an absurdity to suppose, as some mechanical artists do, that the art ought to be so trite, so brought down to the understanding of the vulgar, that they who run may read: when the art is solely levelled to the immediate comprehension of the ignorant, the intelligent can find nothing in it, and there will be nothing to improve or to reward the attention even of the ignorant themselves, upon a second or third view.'³ The artist, thus, invites one to find that reward that awaits close scrutiny, to uncover those connecting strands that are not apparent on first view.

Barry says of his series that his intent was to show 'that the obtaining of happiness, as well individual as public, depends upon cultivating the human faculties'.⁴ The overriding theme, then, is highly characteristic of the eighteenth century: it is the pursuit of happiness by means of knowledge, viewed from the standpoint of both societies and individuals. Not surprisingly the subject matter shows an almost overwhelming bias towards Western civilization. Also, given the preoccupations of the eighteenth century it hardly seems remarkable that the medieval period is virtually ignored, and instead the series focuses most intently on the classical world and on the modern era.

The first painting (Figure 1) shows mankind's slow ascent from ignorance, as Orpheus, the greatest poet and musician of Antiquity, instructs the savage Thracians. Orpheus was credited with the power to enchant wild beasts and could even move rocks and



FIGURE 1: Orpheus, 1777-84. Oil on canvas, 11ft. 10in. x 15ft. 2in.

uproot trees with the sound of his music. But in his account of this painting Barry makes clear that he did not wish to represent this classical hero in his traditional rôle 'as a man with so many fingers operating on an instrument of so many strings, and surrounded with such auditors as trees, birds, and wild beasts; it has been my wish rather to represent him as he really was, the founder of Grecian theology, uniting in the same character, the legislator, the divine, the philosopher, and the poet, as well as the musician.'⁵ Barry described the setting as 'a wild and savage country', indicative of the anarchy and confusion to which untutored mankind is prey. Inhospitable mountains form the background, and the shelter in the middle distance is only a cave whose rude inhabitants have little protection from the stalking lion.



FIGURE 2: A Grecian Harvest-Home, 1777-84. Oil on canvas, 11ft. 10in. x 15ft. 2in.



FIGURE 3: *Crowning the Victors at Olympia*, 1777-84. Oil on canvas, 11ft. 10in. × 42ft. 11in.

The painting *Orpheus* is followed by *A Grecian Harvest-Home* (Figure 2), which, with its pleasant prospect of gently rolling hills and well-cultivated fields inhabited by a contented populace, depicts a more advanced stage of civilization. Again the artist provides an informative description: 'In the distance is a farmhouse, binding corn, bees, &c. male and female employments, courtship, marriage, and a number of little children every-where. In short, I have endeavoured to introduce whatever could best point out a state of happiness, simplicity, and fecundity, in which, though not attended with much eclat, yet, perhaps, the duty we owe to God, to our neighbour, and ourselves, is much better attended to in this, than in any other stage of our progress.'⁶ Virgil's *Georgics* provides the literary support for this vision of an agricultural community of simple dignity and virtue, an agrarian paradise that supplies the necessary moral foundation for civilization's progress.

In the foreground one sees a harvest festival, in which young men and women dance around a double terminal figure of Sylvanus and Pan. It is an idyllic rural scene, but Barry indicates that sadly this simple harmony must soon be left behind. The break in the chain of figures and the pensive, melancholy features of the central dancer are suggestive of the sad awareness that this world of innocence and fecundity cannot long endure. Despite the fact that the next stage of civilization's development is more advanced, it is also filled with tensions and anxieties that are barely perceptible within this georgic landscape. The woman holding the skein of thread glimpsed between the herm and the dancing figure at the far right offers an echo of the Fate Clotho and thus reinforces the sense of time's unrelenting passage.

For civilization's climactic stage Barry depicted an idealized representation of one of the Olympic Games (Figure 3). Framing the procession are a statue of Hercules representing physical prowess and a statue of Minerva symbolizing wisdom. The procession unfolds from left to right. Barry himself appears seated at the base of the statue of Hercules in the character of the classical Greek painter Timanthes. Next comes the winner of the chariot race, beside whom walks the Greek poet Pindar playing his lyre and followed by a

chorus. The white horse of the victor of the horse race rears up, revealing the first pocket of spectators, the most prominent of whom is Pericles, who has been given the features of the late Earl of Chatham.

The principal group of victors consists of Diagoras of Rhodes, a former champion, who is carried on the shoulders of his two victorious sons. The winner of the armed race is next in line, and in front of him the winner of the foot-race receives from one of the lesser judges an olive crown and palm branch. Scientists and philosophers are grouped together in the second pocket of spectators, and the three principal judges are enthroned to their right.

As we have seen, landscape plays an important rôle in this story of man's slow ascent from barbarism to refinement told within the framework of ancient Greece. In this instance, although the setting is by no means urban, monumental structures dominate the foreground. Pairs of columns and two statues frame the stadium, which itself is organized around a robust pillar and impressive throne, while in the background looms the temple of Jupiter Olympus.

In the next two paintings Barry proceeds to offer direction to contemporary England, particularly in terms of those concerns closest to a society instituted for the encouragement of commerce, manufactures and the arts. *Commerce, or the Triumph of the Thames*



FIGURE 4: *Commerce, or the Triumph of the Thames*, 1777-84, tower added in 1801. Oil on canvas, 11ft. 10in. × 15ft. 2in.



FIGURE 5: The Distribution of Premiums in the Society of Arts, 1777-84, portions added in 1789 and 1801. Oil on canvas, 11ft. 10in. x 15ft. 2in.

(Figure 4) celebrates Britain's beneficent maritime trade. The illustrious British seamen Sir Walter Raleigh, Sir Francis Drake and Captain Cook propel the Thames's shell-throne, while Mercury, the god of commerce, hovers overhead. The following tritons and nereids hold aloft those articles of English manufacture that are dispersed to the four principal trading continents of Asia, Europe, Africa and America, which are personified at the left. Dr. Charles Burney, the distinguished musician, is also in the procession, and as Horace Walpole remarked, he 'is not only swimming in his clothes, but playing on a harpsichord, a new kind of water-music'.⁷ There are a number of precedents for the mingling of allegorical with historical figures, but even though Barry does not violate academic doctrine, by plunging recognizable characters into the Thames he obviously has overstepped the bounds of common sense.⁸

The second picture, on the right hand side of the east wall (Figure 5), is a group portrait showing the Society of Arts gathered to distribute its awards promoting the arts, agriculture, manufactures, and commerce. It is composed around four major groupings. From left to right, the President, Lord Romney, congratulates two farmers, one of whom is Arthur Young, while the Prince of Wales looks on; next Elizabeth

Montagu presents to the Duchess of Northumberland a young girl who holds up a sample of her work; Samuel Johnson points out Mrs. Montagu's beneficent example to the Duchesses of Rutland and Devonshire; and on the right are members admiring the drawings of the art competitors. In the background on the left are various types of machinery, while works of art dominate the centre. Essentially this painting is about the patronage of the arts. Barry not only highlights the Society's distribution of premiums, but in the background on the right he includes two other institutions. First comes his interpretation of the riverfront of Somerset House, which was already the new home of the Royal Academy, and beyond is St. Paul's Cathedral, which in this context is to be seen as an institution with the potential of promoting religious art.

The last painting in the series, *Elysium and Tartarus* (Figure 6), shows man's final retribution as he is either rewarded or punished for his conduct in this world. In accordance with the subjects in the first five paintings, the elect is primarily composed of figures drawn from classical Antiquity or from the post-medieval period. For the most part, philosophers and statesmen occupy the prominent foreground positions, while poets, writers and artists dominate the upper regions, a reflection of Barry's belief that a society must first be grounded on principles of justice and freedom before the full benefits of civilization can be realized. Rather than paint God directly, the artist imagines him as present beyond the frame at the upper left, his beams of light radiating throughout heaven.

Even this brief outline of the series' content reveals, however, a noteworthy omission. Even though there are numerous Christians in the last three paintings depicting the modern era and the inhabitants of eternity, nowhere in the entire series is there a biblical character. Nowhere can one find clearly delineated such figures as Adam, Abraham, Moses, St. Peter, or St. Paul, not to mention Christ himself. In Barry's vision of eternity even the classical names *Elysium* and *Tartarus* have replaced those of heaven and hell. In addition, the progress traced in the first three paintings does not reflect that of the biblical account, which proceeds from the golden age of the Garden of Eden to



FIGURE 6: *Elysium and Tartarus, or the State of Final Retribution*, 1777-84, portions added in 1798 and 1801. Oil on canvas, 11ft. 10in. x 42ft. 11in.

the Fallen World to Redemption. Thus, while Christians appear in the series, Christianity itself seems hardly to matter at all.

(To be continued)

WILLIAM L. PRESSLY

NOTES

1. *The Works of James Barry*, ed. by Edward Fryer, London, 1809, I, p. 317.
2. *An Account of a Series of Pictures, in the Great Room of the Society of Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce, at the Adelphi*, London, 1783, in *Works*, II, p. 318.
3. *An Account, Works*, II, pp. 314-15.
4. *An Account, Works*, II, p. 323. The description of the paintings given here is necessarily a brief one. For a fuller account, one should consult Barry's own writings, the present author's book *The Life and Art of James Barry*, New Haven and London, 1981, and D. G. C. Allan's 'The Progress of Human Culture and Knowledge', *Connoisseur*, parts i and ii, CLXXXVI, June 1974, pp. 100-9, and CLXXXVIII, February 1975, pp. 98-107, and his 'The Chronology of James Barry's Work for the Society's Great Room', parts i and ii, *Jnl RSA*, CXXI (1983), pp. 214, 283. Portions of the present article also rely heavily on the relevant entries in my exhibition catalogue *James Barry: The Artist as Hero*, The Tate Gallery, London, 1983.
5. *An Account, Works*, II, p. 324. In a surviving page of his notes, Barry singled out a passage from Francis Bacon's book *Of the Proficiency and Advancement of Learning*, published in 1605, which gives the textual conceit. Bacon wrote that Orpheus's ability to tame wild beasts for as long as they could hear his music 'aptly described the nature and condition of men; who are full of savage and unreclaimed desires; of profite, of lust, of revenge; which as long as they give eare to precepts, to lawes, to religion, sweetly touched with eloquence and perswasion of Bookes, of Sermons, of harangues; so long is societie and peace maintained; but if these instruments bee silent; or that sedition and tumult make them not audible; all things dissolve into Anarchie and Confusion' (*Of the Proficiency and Advancement of Learning*, London, 1605, verso of p. 32. Barry's manuscript notes to this book are to be found in volume one of the Lewis Walpole Library Albums at Farmington, Connecticut).
6. *An Account, Works*, II, p. 327.
7. Walpole to William Mason, 11th May 1783, *Horace Walpole's Correspondence* (Yale edition), 1955, XXIX, p. 300.
8. Because the colossal tower at the far right is a later addition of 1801, it can be passed over as having little bearing on a discussion of the meaning of the series as it was originally conceived.

ROCOCO: ART AND DESIGN IN HOGARTH'S ENGLAND (AT THE VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM)

Rococo apparently originated at the end of the eighteenth century in the studio of the French Neoclassical painter J. L. David, as a contemptuous term for the art of the days of Louis XV; only recently has it been used in an appreciative sense, for art following the Baroque and preceding the Neoclassical style. English rococo was mainly a phenomenon of the period 1730-60 and mainly influenced by France, a country usually regarded by the English with a fascination mingled with contempt.

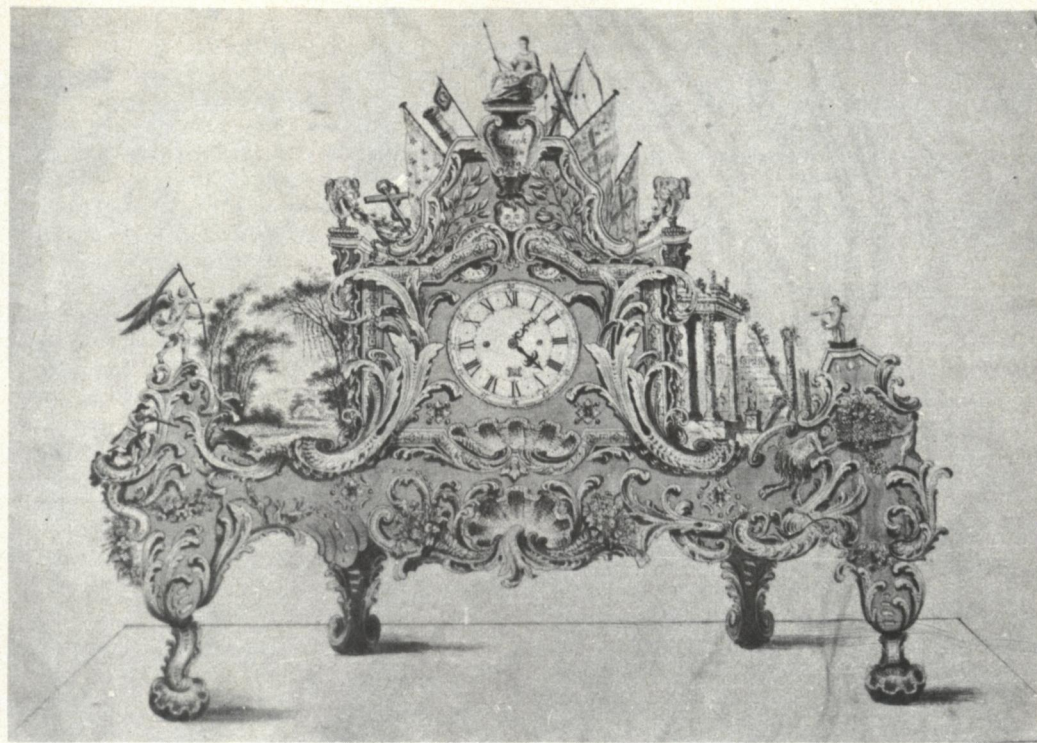
The political circle of Frederick Prince of Wales,

Hogarth and his St. Martin's Lane Academy (founded in 1753), the sculptor Roubiliac, the French engraver Gravelot who arrived in England in 1732, the furniture designer Thomas Chippendale, were among the creators and inspirers of the new style. Lightness, asymmetry, fancifulness, Hogarth's curving 'line of beauty', bright colours set off by white and gold, harmonious combination of naturalistic and artificial motifs, were among its characteristics, a revival of Chinoiserie and the lighter side of 'Gothick' among its offshoots. Slaughter's Coffee House in St. Martin's Lane was a convenient convivial centre for its artistic practitioners, while Vauxhall Gardens provided a charming setting for (to borrow the title of a record of eighteenth-century songs I saw recently) 'Flirt in Rococo'.

Although contributing extensively from the resources of its own departments, the V & A has drawn on over a hundred outside lenders, not counting private collections, in Great Britain, the USA and France. This Society loaned drawings of a raffle leaf executed by Frederick Miller in 1757 at the Society's premises under William Shipley's supervision, and a design for a clock, commemorative of the taking of Quebec in 1759, by William Herbert, with a profusion of shells, scrolls and trophies.

Certainly much in evidence is that 'Intricacy in form' that Hogarth defined 'to be that peculiarity in the lines, which comprises it, that leads the eye a wanton kind of chase, and from the pleasures that it gives the mind, entitles it to the name of beautiful'. Curved asymmetrical cartouches appear on silverware, title-pages and trade cards. Love of asymmetry curves one scroll upwards and one downwards in the broken scroll pediment top of a bureau cabinet made at Dresden for Augustus III of Poland. In a gilt pine wall sconce by James Pascall there is a great thrust from bottom left to top right as a hound pursues a deer, while six candle holders coil out like lianas. The President's chair of the Shakespeare Club, probably designed by Hogarth in 1756 for a temple in the garden of Garrick's Hampton villa, is everywhere as rococo as could be, with a floral trellis back, carved shells, boldly scrolled arms with serpents curving round them, and asymmetrical trophy of musical instruments at the top, and satyr masks on the cloven-footed cabriolet legs.

Nature, eked out by dragons and ho ho birds, sprouts from picture frames and coils round candlesticks. Crayfish are the handles of sauce boats and salt cellars. A turnip with its leaves forms the handle of a silver tureen by Parker and Wakelin, while a spray of seaweed performs the same office for a plaice-shaped Chelsea sauceboat and cover. *A Shooting Party* by John Wootton frames Frederick, Prince of Wales, the Duke of Queensberry and Sarah Churchill's favourite grandson, with a hunting sword, bow and quiver, powder flasks, oak leaves, bulrushes, snipe, duck, hawk with prey, hounds' heads, lion mask and Prince of



Design for a clock, commemorative of the victory at Quebec in 1759, by William Herbert (pen, ink and wash; lent from the Society's collection)



Frame for John Wootton's The Shooting Party carved by Paul Petit (Her Majesty The Queen)

Wales feathers. The carver Paul Petit certainly earned his £21.

Silverware by Paul De Lamerie is decorated with an intricate richness of ornament far removed from the standard image of chaste Georgian design. The spiral fluting of his coffee pot of 1738 for Sir John Lequesne might almost have inspired an *art nouveau* design. His richly encrusted ewer and basin for the Goldsmiths' Company combines design elements from France, Italy, Holland and Northern Europe. High relief unicorns and a lady with weighing scales are surrounded by putti, sea monsters and fabulous beasts. James Shruder's coffee pot of 1750 has as its spout the horn blown by a seahorse-riding triton. Silver candlesticks designed by George Michael Moser (who received a premium for designing a medal for the Society in 1758, although it was too 'rococo' and therefore too costly for use) combine powerful twisted forms with statues of Apollo and Daphne inspired by Bernini.

The sculptor Roubiliac who came to England in the 1730s, eventually became a member of this Society. His models for monuments to the Montagu family show dramatic groupings and movement in the figures. His Handel of 1738, the earliest lifesize marble statue of a living artist, and strikingly informal in its clothing, is vividly displayed against a dark curtain in the section devoted to Vauxhall Gardens. Two laid

tables with seated effigies of ladies suggesting the supper boxes of the gardens, adorned with paintings by Hayman and others of the St. Martin's Lane group, seem to foreshadow Goya's early designs for tapestries. In the centre is a tree and a model of Vauxhall by night, while Handel and birdsong provide an aural background.

The paintings include several group portraits which tend to be stiff when not by Hogarth, but the outdoor ones have a greater informality inspired by the *fêtes champêtres* of Watteau. Exhibits of various types, furniture, paintings, silverware, porcelain, textiles, tend to be mixed together, and there is one room setting centred on a large carpet by Passavant of Exeter, who won a premium from the Society for a carpet in 1758. Its furnishings include a pier glass by Matthias Lock, brooded over by a bird, from Corsham Court, and a marquetry desk reputed to have been given by Horace Walpole to his niece.

The dresses displayed are characterized by large non-naturalistic flowers, later replaced by botanically accurate flowers, and full sack-backs, shown swelling out in a high wind in a drawing of two ladies walking by Paul Sandby. Over one thousand dated silk designs by the Lincolnshire parson's daughter, Anna Maria Garthwaite, survive.

After seeing this exhibition it will be difficult to agree with the once fairly widespread view that rococo had little influence on English style.

The exhibition is on view until 30th September.

DAVID GODDARD

THE MARY ROSE TRUST

Major advances have been made by the Portsmouth-based Mary Rose Trust since Margaret Rule, the Trust's Research Director, presented a paper to the Society three years ago. She outlined the exciting discoveries being made as the layers of silt were stripped away from the wreck of Henry VIII's *Mary Rose*, 40ft. below one of the world's busiest shipping channels.

On 11th October 1982 activity in the Solent reached its climax. Thousands watched as the Tudor warship emerged from the sea suspended from the hook of a giant floating derrick. Later the *Mary Rose*, resting on a barge, was towed into Portsmouth Harbour. Searchlights raked the sky and sirens sounded as ships of today's Royal Navy welcomed home their venerable predecessor.

Now the hull rests in a 'Ship Hall' built over a dry dock just astern of HMS *Victory* in Portsmouth Royal Naval Base. Visitors cross a footbridge spanning the dock for a view of archaeologists and shipwrights working on the first phase of the hull preservation. Ultimately, the ship – still resting on the cradle in

which she was recovered – is to be turned upright from the 60 degree angle at which she lay in the seabed for 437 years.

Work is also underway to convert an historic boat-house close to the Mary Rose Ship Hall into an Exhibition featuring the thousands of objects raised during the years of excavation.

A year after the recovery operation, the Trust reached a landmark: the first paying visitor passed through the Ship Hall. During the years to come, ticket sales will account for an increasing proportion of the Trust's income. But, for the immediate future, the Trust will still be relying heavily on donations from individuals and companies to help cover the initial cost of setting up the *Mary Rose* displays and installing vital conservation equipment. Help can come in many ways: cash donations, deeds of covenant, gifts of kind or services – or membership of the 'friends' organization, the Mary Rose Society. Further information can be obtained from David Evans, Fund-Raising Director, The Mary Rose Trust, Old Portsmouth, PO1 2ET (telephone, Portsmouth (0705) 750521).

GODDARD'S AWARDS

FOR DESIGN IN SILVER 1984

In the latter part of May the presentation took place in London of this year's Goddard's Awards for Design in Silver. The aim of these Awards is to encourage and reward high standards of creativity and workmanship among students of silversmithing and jewellery in this country. As has been shown over the five years of the competition, the publicity generated nationally and locally through the touring exhibition of winning designs has provided a showcase for promising young craftsmen and women.

There are two categories for entry: the first is for students attending BA and vocational courses in silversmithing and jewellery at metalwork colleges in Great Britain. Each college is asked to submit a maximum of eight pieces of work done by students during the current academic year. The second section is open to students who have completed their courses and to post-graduate students who are studying for a Master's Degree.

The winners of the first prizes of £500 each for work submitted in the first above-mentioned category were Andrew Putnam, of Medway College of Design, for a 'high-tech' tea set inlaid with pale green resin, and Jacqueline Evans, of Loughborough College of Art and Design, for a kinetic silver and bronze bracelet. In the second section the winners, of £500 each, were Robin Bush, of the Royal College of Art, for a silver raised teapot, and Alison Bradley, also of the RCA, for a cape-fastener set with turquoises.